

## Comparative Study and the Scholarly Conscience

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These are not the easiest of times for comparative studies, that is, studies that seek to discover and deal with phenomena or patterns that transcend any single cultural tradition. Some would in fact claim that there no longer exists a place for comparative perspectives—that such perspectives are a holdover from a period of armchair diletantism, rendered obsolete by the accumulated data and expertise of a vast pool of specialists on particular societies. Anyone wishing to retain a comparative perspective faces two basic questions: What role are such perspectives to play? And, relative to any significance we allow comparative perspectives, how are they to be evaluated and judged? These questions, which in fact are quite old, were brought home in new form recently in a review by Judith Binney of Marshall Sahlins' recent work *Islands of History*, a collection of essays focused on the Pacific Islands during the initial European political expansion into that region.

The contrast in the situation and perspective of the two scholars is substantial. Judith Binney's disciplinary allegiance is dominantly *history*; she writes carefully researched accounts of the Maori people in the post-European contact period. *Ipsa facto*, her work maintains a close relationship to Maori documents and to present-day concerns of Maori people. Marshall Sahlins' main allegiance is to *anthropology*, though his concern with oral traditions (especially myth and indigenous historical accounts) has caught the eye of many folklorists and historians as well. Though he has done original research in various parts of Polynesia, the part of his work that Binney responds to, his work on the Maori, was done largely from a distance, and with the admission that not all pertinent data (especially archival) was available to him. But the most important divergence of Sahlins' work from Binney's lies in the fact that the kind of history that Sahlins does has

a more theoretical flavor, ultimately incorporating a distinctive philosophy of history. Sahlins' philosophy of history involves a novel use of *structuralist* theory, oriented, dynamically, toward understanding processes of replication and transformation of cultural structures. Among the recurrent themes in Sahlins' method is the idea that historical events and occurrences are re-enactments of, and derive their meaning from, paradigms found in indigenous mythologies.

Binney's review of Sahlins' book focuses largely on Sahlins' treatment of events associated with a Maori *rebel*, Hone Heke, who in the years 1844-46 persistently cut down the flagstaff at the European settlement of Kororareka in the Bay of Islands. Sahlins, suggesting that Heke seemed more intent on the pole than the flag, elaborately relates this event to the significance, discoverable in Maori myth, of the setting up of posts—a theme that runs from the first establishing of cosmic posts to hold sky and earth apart following their primordial separation, to the setting up of ritual posts as a form of making land claims, as recounted in Maori legends of ancestral migrations to New Zealand.

Among the criticisms that Binney levels, two particularly stand out. One is that in relating Heke's actions so exhaustively to mythical precedent, Sahlins "fails to recognise that human beings can grasp quickly" (1986:529); "Heke is taken for a fool if it is not acknowledged that he had learnt from his extensive experiences by 1844 that flags were statements of power and possession" (1986:528-529). Binney points to the evidence of Maori knowledge and adaptation of the custom of flags by the time of the events in question. Yet Binney's treatment does not result in a complete dismissal of Sahlins' argument but rather a more tempered interpretation: "Flags and poles: both had their meanings" (1986:528). The second point concerns the political meaning of Heke's actions. Sahlins had taken Heke's action as expressing an essential rejection of the "Treaty of Waitangi," an accord that was based upon the principle of shared power between British officials and Maori chiefs, and which has been regarded as a founding charter in the history of the nation of New Zealand. Binney, by contrast, argues that Heke's actions were intended to assert the principle of the treaty that supported the local authority of chiefs. In making these and other criticisms, Binney calls attention to what she regards as deficiencies in the documentary evidence, and in the earlier historians' interpretations, that Sahlins' analysis relies on.

My point is not to take a position on any of the empirical disagreements here, but, rather, to comment on the nature of Binney's review, and in doing this, to raise some issues implicit in this scholarly

episode—issues having to do with the nature of scholarly criticism, with the exercise of scholarly conscience, and ultimately, with the place of comparative studies.

First of all, it seems to me essentially incontestable that if Binney, with her particular expertise, believes Sahlins to be in error on the point about the significance of chopping down the flagpole, then she is indeed correct, if not duty-bound, to set this right. It is not an insignificant issue, particularly for people living in New Zealand and concerned with issues related to the bicultural existence that is now part of that society. But the form (including the genre, i.e., "book review") in which the criticism is developed, raises some troubling issues. The first thing that might be noted about Binney's review is its partialness: the only substantive criticism is aimed at what is one part of one chapter. There is the suggestion of a *parts pro toto* argument (Binney calls Sahlins' treatment of Hone Heke her *example*—does this mean that she could produce a similar criticism of any of the other chapters?). Whatever she means to imply here, it is only fair to keep the proportions in mind: Sahlins has written a vast, wide-ranging work, dealing directly with several Pacific societies, and suggesting numerous points of comparison to other societies outside of this part of the world. Binney's critique is aimed at one part, in relation to which she has a detailed expertise.

That Binney herself may not be quite certain what she wants us to make of Sahlins' book as a whole is suggested in the broader ambivalence evident in her review. Her criticisms are aimed at specific empirical issues, her positive comments vaguely toward the work as a whole. Binney's ambivalence is reminiscent of many other instances that in fact make up a perennial feature of the conflict between historically particularist vs. generalizing approaches to social phenomena. In discussing Durkheim's great classic, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, one can go on equally about its theoretical depth and subtlety, or about its ultimate inadequacy in terms of ethnographic details. It is questionable whether Noam Chomsky ever, in terms of the theoretical requirements of his own system, adequately depicted the generation of a single sentence. The question is an old one: how can works that are so bad be so good?

While I (like many others, I suspect) have never fully resolved this dilemma, one part of the resolution must lie in the recognition that there is such a thing as a *theoretical* work, the goals of which are not in all respects coterminous with that of a concrete particularistic history. This is not to imply that the former type of work is excused from getting the *facts* right; rather, it is to call attention to the

existence of the several levels of concern in theoretical works. Much of Sahlins' focus is vested in general theory of historical motivation, process, and representation. The biggest part of this concern—including the potent perspective and inspiration it offers for representing and interpreting the past, and for synthesizing and interpreting historical specifics—still would remain, even if one fully accepted Binney's emendations. The inspiration that the work has provided is not limited to New Zealand or even the Pacific; the work has proven to be thought-provoking in many areas of the world and in many differing intellectual contexts. This kind of contribution is elusive and difficult to assess, and it is here that Binney's review seems less than adequate—leaving one with the feeling that the book (as opposed to specific issues in Maori historiography) has not really been reviewed.

It is not clear at this point what the criteria for judging a theoretical work should be. However, it is certain in advance that theoretical, generalizing, cross-cultural works will come out deficient when judged as though they were examples of particularistic historiography. The choice we have is either to call off the comparative enterprise entirely, or else to develop a pluralistic scholarly conscience, in which the two kinds of works are judged differently, each in terms of what it is trying to do. The mere demographics of modern scholarship has resulted in a proliferation of specialists such that any generalizing work will be grist for the mill of specialists. We could in a sense guarantee ourselves greater freedom from error by calling off the generalizing enterprise; but in doing this we would lose as well whatever it is that leads Binney, despite it all, to call this a "potent work" (as well as "fascinating" and "crammed with good stories as well as extremely shrewd observations and judgments" [1986:529]).

Binney makes two other brief comments that deserve response. The first of these concerns a terse moral critique. Binney asks:

. . . who is Sahlins writing for? Certainly few of the people from the cultures about which he writes, and that is pernicious. The discovery that the Pacific has a history should also lead to a recognition of the responsibility of talking with the people whose history it is. (1986:529)

The idea that a scholar has a responsibility to those whom he/she is writing about is one that is by now well enough established in the human sciences (this is not to say that it is always clear how one translates this sentiment from a platitude to a practice). Binney's work, localized in New Zealand, and taking the form of a narrative

history of Maori concerns, has drawn a response from Maori people, much of it positive. The very fact that Sahlins' work is comparative, and thus about principles abstractable from several societies, entails that it will exist at a degree of abstraction from any particular historical vernacular. Once again, one can ask whether Binney has allowed for the difference in the nature of Sahlins' project, or whether she is simply judging one kind of work in light of another, expecting his work to achieve the same (in this case, moral) goals as hers. If Sahlins' work is less immediately accessible in terms of any particular vernacular, it has nevertheless been perceived as calling attention to the plurality of historical vernaculars, thus shifting the orientation of scholarly historiographic methods towards greater attentiveness to this seemingly general condition of humanity. The very fact that Sahlins has ultimately formulated his concerns at a cross-culturally abstractive level, has allowed his message to have an influence wider than that achievable in the form of particular local histories.

My final comment concerns a comment Binney makes in suggesting the waywardness of building "elaborate interpretations" on "poor history." Binney's sentiment seems a bit too final, as if good history must come first, and then we can begin interpretation. The flaw is that, just as elaborate interpretations are never finished, neither is good history (can we be sure that all of the documents relevant to Hone Heke are in even now?). A more profitable way of looking at the relation between the theoretical and particularist endeavor would be as an ongoing dialogue, with each participant sensitive to the methods, goals, potentials, and limitations of the other—and willing to try to inform judgments in light of these.

### References Cited

- Binney, Judith. 1986. Review of *Islands of History*, by Marshall Sahlins. *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 95:527-530.
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